

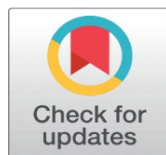
SHEPHERDS OF THE VALLEY: THE ROLE OF CHOPANS IN KASHMIRI RURAL LIFE

Taraiq Ahmad Chopan ¹, Tariq Ahmad Kumar ², Dr. Younus Rashid ³

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar in Department of History University of Kashmir Hazratbal Srinagar, India

² Ph.D. Research Scholar in Department of History University of Kashmir Hazratbal Srinagar, India

³ Assistant Professor Department of History University of Kashmir Hazratbal Srinagar India



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ABSTRACT

The rural social structure of Kashmir was typically marked by strong shared bonds, class stratification, and occupational reliance. Central to this structure were the peasants and other landless groups especially Chopans (shepherds) essential to agrarian life. While the peasants depended on agriculture and livestock for livelihood, the Chopans played a crucial role in sheep rearing and forest resource collection. Their relationship was reciprocal, with Chopans depending on peasants for livelihood, and peasants valuing Chopans for their services and benefactions to agriculture, soil fertility, and cultural life. Moreover, Chopans interconnected with non-agrarian occupational groups such as barbers and potters through a barter system linked in mutual dependence. This paper reveals how rural Kashmir's socio-economic life was supported through deeply rooted customs, cooperation, and oral traditions, highlighting the Chopan community's crucial role in the village ecosystem.

Keywords: Sheep, Peasant, Kohttas, Cheese, Traditional, Forest Vegetables, Community

1. INTRODUCTION

Social Structure of Rural Kashmir: The rural social structure of Kashmir was thickly connected with its rich cultural and historical hereditament. From the beginning, Kashmiri society had been organized along the tracks of a close-knit community, where social bonds and familial ties played a remarkable role. The village was regarded as the primary unit of village life, and within it, a complex connection of relationships and interdependencies exists. The society of rural Kashmir was an amalgamation of different classes who were different from each other in terms of their social and economic aspects. The society had been broadly divided into two categories i.e. 'Upper Class' and 'Lower Classes'. In the 'Upper Class' the peasants formed the majority as the society was predominantly agrarian. Agriculture served as the primary occupation for this significant portion of the population. This peasantry class consisted of cultivators or tillers of land while the second category was formed by all those groups who were 'Land Less People' or 'Occupational Communities'. Each occupational group followed some customs which restricted them from keeping distance in terms of social and cultural aspects from the upper section of the society in Kashmir. In terms of this social stratification, Kashmiri society had historically been characterized by a hierarchical structure based on factors such as occupation, and land ownership.

Relationship of Chopans with Peasant Class: Kashmir had a rich legacy of having a good number of sheep that were an important source for the peasants. Sheep could provide clothing, warmth, and manure to their owners and those peasants who maintained large flocks of sheep kept them on the ground floor of houses to warm their families in the bitter winters. Moreover, sheep had drought power because when a peasant failed to pay revenue to the State due to the failure of crop year, at that time he used to pay his revenue in the form of sheep. The possession of sheep by each peasant family varied as per their wealth and prosperity. It could be five, ten, or twenty in ordinary families but the well-to-do families used to keep forty above sheep in their homes. After the long break of harsh winters in Kashmir, peasants began to think about grazing their sheep kept at their homes. Because during winters sheep were being fed on the dried leaves of willow and elm (bren) trees as there was no green grass available in the valley during the winter season. Usually, peasants considered the livestock Muhimuk Yaar (the friend in need) it was because they derived almost half of their family income from the animals and any time it could be used for any purpose in the family. This fact was established by a very popular saying Tuer Cho Sun Suer (sheep is brick of gold).

As previously discussed the Chopans were landless shepherds in the villages. They neither possessed orchards nor any kind of agricultural land. They were largely dependent on the peasant class to carry out their livelihood in society. Their bread and butter were the result of better living standards of peasants in the society. If peasants were prosperous then it was indeed the prosperity of the Chopan. The Chopans lived in plains as well as mountain areas of Kashmir and engaged in their hereditary sheep-rearing occupation. They were engaged with the primary sector of the economy. Most Chopans of Kashmir were rural indigenous populations providing the services as village shepherds in the region. Chopans were traditional grazers of sheep in the village. They were economically downtrodden having no other source of earning except sheep rearing. As soon as the weather conditions became pleasant in the valley, the peasants of the village decided to select their Chopan. For that purpose, in a village, a committee was formed by big landholders and other Hangdars (influential men) who put forward certain terms and conditions before a Chopan. For example honesty, better quality of grass and amount of remuneration were part of these terms and conditions. During the period of study, for grazing of each sheep by Chopan, he was paid a remuneration of two to three manwats (one manwats was approximately 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ lbs) of paddy or maize by the peasant. The remuneration varied according to the character of the Chopan. If he had a good character, he used to get the highest wages of three manwats. At certain places of Kashmir valley, the peasants were proving themselves as dishonest persons before a Chopans because sometimes he was not paying remuneration to the Chopan at all on one or other pretext. The peasants were not keeping the words that they had made with Chopan on the first day of the agreement of sheep-rearing season. For example, if a peasant had a good rice harvesting season, he used to say what he would give to Chopan that year because a Chopan was in those places invariably subjected to receive the rotten rice or rapeseed as his wages. Even so, there are some other peasants in the villages who provided the two times meals in a day and night stay when a Chopan was being hired from another village for performing his occupational chores in that very particular village.

It was an old custom in Kashmir that whenever a Chopan occurred in the mountain pastures or Ilak, a peasant used to go at least three times there with salt, therefore after one or two months of summer grazing of sheep in pastures, a peasant used to go with salt and other necessary food items for a Chopan. It was generally believed among the peasants that salt was important for wool production which could be proved with this proverb Nun Che Mun (salt means wool). On this occasion, a Chopan received his Groose (agricultural client) with great respect. He was served the same food that a Chopan used to eat for himself. It had been observed that when peasants went to him with eatable things such as rice, wheat, chilly, salt, turmeric (victuals), etc. While on the other hand, Chopan also appreciated it and returned him with Foohi Mond (cheese). Which they had prepared with great effort and love and could be proved by this saying, Gabi Dodas Chamen Fohes Lozi Karmas Ratas Dohas (milk of sheep and cheese pampered day and night). It was very sweet. The Chopans were aided by the peasants when they felt the need to construct pasture shelters called Dhook or Kohtta during summer seasons at a collective level or voluntary basis called Halsheeri. The average life of Kohttas in pastures was approximately thirty years after it broke due to snowfall. They had exclusive rights over them. If any Chopan wanted to sell his Kohttas due to some unavoidable circumstances at that time he could do so only with proper consultation with his elder members of the community. The materials that Chopans used in these Kohttas were big logs of wood, and stones, soil and roof cover of it is given of leaves from pine of the forests. These pasture shelters were recorded by the revenue department in the name of Chopans.

When Chopans moved with flock towards the upper slopes of the valley he was pursued by the peasants for many days to fold the sheep on the rice fields which were as yet unsown for one night added greatly to the fertility of the soil.

For that purposes, a Chopan was eagerly awaited by the peasant for many days to sit the sheep in their unsown rice fields because Mengan (sheep droppings) were considered the richest source of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium which enhanced the fertility of soil than any other pah (manures). At this event, a Chopan was highly respected and given a special dish called Patheri Bata (eating rice). It was served in a Trami (a big copper plate) filled with rice and several omelets.

Apart from the grazing of sheep in the highland pastures, a Chopan used to collect whatever forest vegetables were available. He dried them, and later distributed among the peasant clients in the village and this practice is called Pahal Sanz Daail (Gifts given by Chopan). These vegetables included Rheum (Pambahak), Polygonum sp (Drubi), Dandelion (Handh), Iberian knapweed (Kraich), Ferns (Ded), Sochal, Dipsacus inermis (Wapal hak), Rumex (Abij) and Hydnum coralloides (Kaho khur). Not only this, Chopans also collected some medicinal plants such as Van/Ban Vangun (Used for cancer patients), Sheet Khaar (Sheet means Eighty in Kashmiri language and used for curing Eighty diseases), Macrotomia Benthami (Gawzaban) [used for women after delivery], Dopah (used for incenses), Mohand (used for fractures), Kord (used as gram masala), Wild Rhubarb (Pambi Chalen), Joug Padshah (Yograi plant or Phen Kamal) situated at very elevations points of the pastures used for many diseases such as keeping blood flow of human body smooth, heart problems, joints and skin related diseases and Aneklandia costus (Kuth) [used for ulcers, hair wash, a remedy in Cholera, preservation of cloths against the moths and other vermins and purification of water in wells.] Apart from their sheep grazing, they were having good knowledge and were expert in identifying the medicinal plants in the forests of Kashmir which they provided to their peasant clients and also to local Hakims (local doctors). During our period of study, we found that the peasants and other villagers were mostly dependent on these medicinal herbs from forests. The Chopan was instrumental in bringing these products to the villages of the Kashmir valley. Therefore Chopans were acting as a link between forest products and rural society.

After completing Wasaiy or migration from the pastures, Chopan was given the Mangai (customary articles) in the form of paddy grass known as Khaire Mangai and other condiments in the village by the peasants apart from his fixed remuneration. Not only had this but he used to receive special gifts on certain auspicious occasions like Eid, Urs (birth anniversary of any Sufi saint), and marriages by the peasants. The livestock owner became very happy when he received all the sheep in good condition from the Chopan and in that happiness, a peasant gave him one sheep out of every fifty which was known as Dapi Tchuer. At the marriage day of peasants, Chopan used to give many services at the home of peasants such as serving of guests, supplying the water and washing of the clothes. Moreover, on death occasions, he also did some important work at peasants home. It was performed by generations in the Chopan community that after the final completion of grazing in the villages, Chopan used to go to peasants' home during winters to tell them stories such as Sam Nama, Yousuf Zulikha, Haroon Rashid, and Liala Majnoon. It had been seen that during winters both Chopans and peasants used to stay at their homes due to the harsh weather outside so to spend these harsh winters and its long nights, they invited the Chopans into their homes to enjoy this season. Apart from that, by listening to these old stories they were able to get moral lessons from them. It was for this reason that the peasant families listened the Chopan with great interest and in this way; he was serving the gap of modern means of recreational sources such as radio and television, during our early period of study as society was mainly dependent on the oral tradition so far information is concerned.

Relationship of Chopans with the Non-Agrarian Class: After the peasants, the majority of the rural society was formed by the Non-Agriculturalist Class which was at the lowest strata of the society. They were also known as Pasmanda Tabka (lower class). Among this class, Chopans had been placed at the lower step of the social ladder by these landless people because they were regarded as Jungli (forest dwellers) owing their living places in the forests and they (Chopans) mostly paid less attention to their health and hygiene and moreover, during the forests or pasture life Chopans remained separated from the rest of communities and were practicing very primitive occupation of sheep rearing which makes them a 'Semi-nomadic community'. Despite this, no one could deny the fact that a Chopan community was very important for the whole village. Apart from the peasants, some Nangars were keeping the sheep at their homes that they needed to be grazed by the Chopan. As we have previously discussed these occupational communities were without any type of land in the villages that could sustain their livestock in terms of fodder. Therefore they had much more dependence on Chopans for their sheep to be grazed in the Kahcharais (common grazing grounds) and Nuer (pastures). While on the other, hand Chopans were also dependent on these classes. For instance, the barber was as important to Chopan as he was to the peasant because Chopan also needed to shave or trim his hair and beard. The children of the Chopan community were also circumcised (kathanhal) by the barber. On this day child was placed on the Futh (basket) under which a cock was kept which was given to the barber. Moreover, the village barber used to visit the Chopans even in the pastures regularly at fixed intervals when Chopan needed his service which in other words was a blessing in disguise for

the barber because his visit to the pastures would give him another chance to inquire about his sheep which he had entrusted to the Chopan. The pattern of the treatment by the Chopan towards this class in pastures remained the same because both classes were equal before a Chopan. It was for this reason that he used to receive him like as he used to receive and treat the peasant; and returned him with the same gifts made of milk sheep such as Foohi Mond (cheese) and other forest vegetables etc.

The Kashmiri villagers also earned a good name as artisans for their skill in art and manufacturing, apart from Srinagar. There were some places in the Kashmir villages that were famous for their special manufacturing. The most notable among them were the areas of Ananthnag, Kulgam, Bijbihara, and Zainagir. Likewise, the potter community (kraals) also known as Kumar in the villages was an artisan community of the Kashmir valley that also provided their services to the rural population. The traditional occupation of the potter community was preparing earthenware which was the primary source of their income. They used to make the earthenware of different shapes and sizes and other articles of daily use. For instance, they made Kundal (firepot), Nut (jar), Dagul (big vessel), Antu (lid of the container), Jagir (bowel which draws the smoke through water), and Chilam (in which fire is kept) for villagers. During the period of study mostly the villagers were using the pottery utensils in their homes. A potter always used to make the pottery of different uses for different people in the village for example he used to make a unique pot for Chopans called Kee Weer apart from his daily used pottery in which a Chopan daily stored the milk of sheep. One more interesting pot that Chopans received from the Kraals was Nati Weer shaped like a big bucket that was used for processing or making the Gorus (yogurt). The Chopans also used to receive the big earthen jars for storing the rice and other grains in their homes. To use warm water during winters, the potters of valley supplied a special earthen container called Mati to the Chopans because they lacked the purchasing power of the copper container for this purpose. In return, the Chopans traditionally gave animal products such as milk, cheese, ghee, butter, woolen blankets, and the skin of sheep to these various occupational communities instead of their services. The Chopans, who were predominantly shepherds, provided even sometimes the livestock to these groups in exchange for their services, which were essential for various household needs. This custom of exchange of goods had existed for a long period within the socio-economic fabric of Kashmir's rural society which reflected the interdependence and cooperation between different occupational and agrarian groups. This mutual relationship helped to sustain both communities and fostered a sense of reciprocal support and cooperation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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